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ABSTRACT

The problems of rural students at risk of school failure and incompletion are in many ways similar to problems of urban low-income children and young people. These problems include poverty, unemployed parents, substance abuse, low self-esteem, child abuse, and sexual activity. However, children in many chronically depressed and isolated rural communities also face the educational disadvantages of underfunded schools, family and community values that are inconsistent with modern career orientations and instrumental schooling, and loss of local schools due to consolidation. A case study of Braxton County, West Virginia, and its school system focuses on a small town, Burnsville, and its one remaining school building, which houses elementary and middle schools. Continued economic decline since the 1930s led to massive outmigration, and both factors diminished the local tax base and prompted school consolidation. In the face of a high prevalence of at-risk factors, the school district has pursued several strategies: (1) implementation of "effective schools" guidelines, such as high expectations and emphasis on basic academic skills; (2) district support of community libraries and youth programs; (3) aggressive pursuit of outside grants for supplemental programs; (4) development of caring school environments that enhance children's self-concept; (5) dropout prevention through student advocacy teams; and (6) student visits to businesses and higher education institutions. (SV)

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CHILDREN AT RISK IN AMERICA'S RURAL SCHOOLS: ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Alan J. DeYoung

University of Kentucky

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During America's early 20th century Country Life Movement, many citizens began to have serious second-thoughts about the abandonment of rural America that had accompanied our industrial development (e.g., Grantham, 1983). Since then, a vision of the countryside as some sort of paradise lost appears related to episodic flights of many urban Americans away from perceived problems of the city, even registering briefly on the demographers' scale as a "reverse migration trend" in the 1970s. Yet, the data on rural life in America does not support many of the benign assumptions about the quality available to those who work and live there now. The cruel irony is that while many Americans express interest in rural or small town life, those living in the countryside now are often belittled and stereotyped in a variety of negative ways.

Demographic information about rural America likewise suggests an incomplete but complicated picture. Metropolitan areas are comprised of counties with a central city of at least 50,000, together with their surrounding suburbs, according to the U.S. Census: everything else constitutes "non-metro." Under such a nomenclature, approximately 25% of the U.S. population lives in non-metro (thus by default, rural) areas. However, among non-metro counties, those with the largest growth rates this century have typically been in counties adjacent to metropolitan ones, suggesting the growth of employment and cultural ties between many non-metro communities and metropolitan America.

One fact that demographic information accurately suggests is that rural America is no longer primarily agricultural, nor has it been for decades. Actually, there are eight primary types of economic activities to be found within America's 2,443 non-metro counties: farming, mining, manufacturing, retirement,

government services, federal lands, persistent poverty, and "unclassified." Of these counties, only 702, or 29%, are farm "dependent." As well, there are 242 non-metro counties categorized as persistent poverty counties; 200 counties whose economic base is from mining; and 515 counties whose economies are based on retirement income (Bender et al., 1985).

This suggests that non-metropolitan America is very diverse, that much of it is non-agricultural, that much of it is poor, and that many of the contexts and subcultures of rural America are heavily influenced by the age, income, and the extractive nature of occupations of those who live and work within them. Even where agriculture is the dominant industry, most modern farming is really "agri-business," meaning that fewer and fewer people are actually engaged in farming even as crop yields rise. Successful farmers today more typically consider themselves to be high-technology businessmen engaged in agriculture. And, there are entire rural U.S. states that do not generate enough farm income to be considered agricultural by the U.S. government, due to modern agricultural production and distribution factors. Accordingly, fewer and fewer American rural children live on farms in stereotypical farm households. Rather, only about one-twelfth of all rural children live on farms, and only one of eleven rural jobs is a farm-related job (CDF, 1992).

Poverty in Rural America

Most chronically poor counties in the nation continue to be located in non-metro areas, particularly in Appalachia and the South. In 1986, the non-metro poverty rate was 50% higher than the metro rate (O'Hare, 1988). In fact, general poverty rates for all non-metro counties nearly equaled the poverty rate for our

central cities in the late 1980s (CDF, 1992; Porter, 1989). Rural poverty in the 1980s also stayed higher, rose more rapidly, and fell more slowly in the "recovery" period (O'Hare, 1988). Displaced rural workers were unemployed more than 50% longer than urban workers and, when they did return to work, were more likely than urban workers to take pay cuts and lose insurance benefits (Podgursky, 1988). Among the 242 persistent poverty counties in 1985, average per capita income has remained in the lowest U.S. income quintile over at least the past four decades.

For that matter, average per capita income declined substantially during the 1980s even in counties with high outputs from manufacturing and extraction. Job creation in rural America typically involves the creation of positions paying either minimum wage or close to it (Reid, 1990). Manufacturing plants that locate in the countryside tend to be of the low-wage and routine production type, resulting in lower wages compared to those earned metro America (e.g., Lyson, 1989). In addition, workers in rural service occupations—where the bulk of new rural employment is projected to occur—are also having economic difficulty. Even full-time workers in service industries have extremely high poverty rates. Controlling for inflation, annual pay per job fell 7% from 1979 to 1988 for rural off-farm workers, even as more and more rural families moved closer to metropolitan areas in order to seek employment.

While some communities attracted manufacturing plants in the 1960s and 1970s, many of these left rural America during the 1980s to go "off-shore." The net loss of manufacturing jobs even between 1979 and 1986 in rural America was 12% (McGranahan, 1987). So too, as mining operations continue to mechanize,

coal tonnage continues to rise at the same time as do rates of unemployment among miners. Compensatory government assistance programs meanwhile have changed and had negative consequences for many rural children and families. In 1979, federal government benefits reduced poverty levels for approximately 20% of rural families. In 1987, only 10% of rural families have so benefited. As well, AFDC benefits in rural states are typically much lower than similar benefits in more metropolitan states (CDF, 1992).

Racial and ethnic inequality is also well represented in rural America, for 29% of the rural poor are minorities, and they suffer more severely from poverty than either rural whites or urban minorities. For example, 44% of rural African-Americans were poor in 1987, compared to 33% of their urban counterparts. The poverty rate of rural African-Americans exceeds the poverty rate of rural whites by 200%, and similar contrasts characterize the relationships of poverty rates among rural Hispanics, Native Americans, and Alaska Natives.

Children and Poverty

Great Society writings on the status of poor rural children typically suggested that rural places and their inhabitants could be positively affected once rural citizens had access to the knowledge and social programs emerging in metropolitan America.(e.g., Harrington, 1962). Later assessments have in general been more critical, suggesting that many local communities and their children remain trapped in declining local economies with few real avenues of upward social mobility, save for the "escape" to the city where they become city problems rather than country problems. In any event, rural poverty has not disappeared with further maturation of our national economy.

An important misconception of rural families living in poverty is that their living costs must be lower as housing costs and agricultural products must both be significantly cheaper in the countryside. While dwelling costs are generally lower in rural America, related costs such as garbage collection, sewage, and water are rarely included in urban vs. rural comparisons. When separate costs for water lines, gas lines, septic services, and garbage disposal are factored in, rural costs of living more closely approximate those of city dwellers. In addition, few rural families produce more than a fraction of their foodstuffs today. And transportation costs in rural America are significantly higher than in metropolitan areas (CDF, 1992).

Schooling Issues Related to Rural At-Risk Children

Twenty-two percent of America's schools are non-metro, and 12% of our children attend them. Beyond that, we have only recently begun to investigate the status of rural education as it pertains to children at risk . The National Rural Development Institute (1990) completed a large national survey of rural school districts specifically related to perceptions held by school administrators regarding the nature and severity of at-risk conditions in rural schools. While return rates for this survey were arguably too low for the sorts of statistical analyses policy makers might desire, the tentative findings were consistent with images created by the previous review of income and family conditions in rural America.

Among the at-risk categories proposed by the NRDI were substance abuse, depression/low self esteem, child abuse, sexually active, disabled, illiteracy, and poverty. The NRDI also included several student disability categories and school levels to co-vary with their at-risk categories. Respondents were asked to describe

the percentage of their students (both handicapped and non-handicapped) who fell into the various categories provided. In comparisons of rural vs. non-rural children across all student types and at-risk categories, 39 of the variables analyzed yielded significant differences between rural and non-rural students using multiple analysis of variance protocols. Of the 39, reported incidences of at-risk situations/conditions were higher for rural students than non-rural students in 34 comparisons. That is, in only five of 39 comparisons did non-rural (typically urban) school administrators report higher incidences of at-risk situations in their schools than did rural school administrators. In the non-handicapped category, 19.3% of rural students were reported be from dysfunctional families; 18.8% from poverty households; 13.7% were reported as being depressed or with low self esteem; and 11.4% as being victims of child abuse.

In a report to the National Rural, Small Schools Task force, by CEDaR (1987), 2,445 rural school teachers, superintendents, school board members were queried regarding their perceptions of priorities for rural schools across the nation. Among their responses were many that reflect national concerns as well as rural ones: e. g., 60% believed that thinking and reasoning skills of their students were inadequate and required attention, and 36% believed that the quality of staff in-service programs needed to be improved. As well, 60% of survey respondents were particularly concerned with the academic performance of their (rural) students from low-income families, 48% were concerned with their inability to reward or recognize outstanding teachers, and 41% feared for the levels of self esteem and aspirations of their students. Regional differences were also clearly

recognizable in the CEDaR survey: school administrators in Appalachia and the South reporting far worse schooling situations than each of the other regions.

The Children's Defense Fund summarized a variety of data-based studies related to children at risk, and argued that rural schools and their students suffer a number of important weaknesses compared to schools in much of metropolitan America. They note, for example, that providing equal educational opportunities in rural places is more costly than in metropolitan places, given economies of scale considerations. In sparsely populated school districts, costs of offering similar services and/or courses as in larger schools is typically higher when calculated on a per-student basis. Yet, since many rural states have no or minimal cost equalization formulas based upon population density, local taxes must be relied upon heavily to equalize expenditures. Naturally, poor school systems have difficulty in generating such extra taxes, leading to significant inequities. These inequities become translated into fewer mathematics and advanced placement courses in rural high schools, fewer programs for either gifted and talented children or alternative school programs and programs for pregnant teenagers, or in some cases even the failure to provide transportation to and from school (CDF, 1992).

The CDF study also reported on a number of other metro/non-metro comparisons of schools based on national studies like the High School and Beyond Survey and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Among the findings: rural teachers are less experienced, less well trained, and have faster turnover rates than metropolitan teachers; achievement scores for rural students are slightly below those of students in metropolitan areas; high school dropout

rates are higher in rural America than in metropolitan America; rural school dropouts are less likely to return to school than are those in our cities; out-migration of young people who have completed high school is high, leaving more poorly educated citizens behind; and the rural college-going and college-completing rate is lower for rural high school graduates than for graduates of metro schools.

Schooling, Instrumentalism and Rural Education Reform

Accounts of rural poverty and rural schooling difficulties typically cite the sorts of economic and sociological data just presented prior to making programmatic suggestions. Unfortunately, most policy briefs on such concerns pay little attention to local school and community histories and cultures as they pertain to school improvement issues. In rural regions contiguous to metropolitan areas and/or where economic development trends have culturally transformed a host of local institutions and employment possibilities, such a focus may be comparatively unimportant. On the other hand, in depressed and isolated schools and school districts—where arguably the majority of at-risk students live and go to school— such factors are probably quite central to anyone interested in positively intervening in rural public education.

Extensive formal schooling in the U.S. has by now become an economic ultimatum rather than an opportunity. Although there remains a strong (and perhaps valid) academic criticism of educational "credentialism" in American culture, it remains the case that most of the children this essay is concerned with who are not equipped with at least a high school diploma are and will remain economically and socially at-risk throughout their lives. Yet, such a conviction

was not the basis upon which rural schools in the U.S. were historically based, and equivocal feelings about such utilities in many (often depressed and isolated) rural communities remain even today.

Educational traditions in much of rural America pre-date the advent of common schooling and secondary education, both of which were more specifically instituted toward instrumental outcomes of schooling in a multi-ethnic and rapidly urbanizing America. Expenditures for public education and expectations for student success today remain underlying themes of contemporary schooling dedicated to the view that educational investments are investments in the national economy, improving worker productivity, and promoting national citizenship (e.g. Schultz, 1981). Such reform efforts are similar to those internationally, yet with our decentralized system of school governance, school improvements must become filtered through literally thousands of state and local education agencies.

Boli and Ramirez (1986) suggest that contemporary educational policies and practice internationally rely on various world-views and institutional structures that directly conflict with the underlying beliefs and economic experiences of many rural families and communities. For example, market-driven national economies depend upon individuals (not families or communities) becoming primary social units, and children (rather than adults) become the main focus of public schooling. Schools thus increasingly become sites for the creation of individual actors oriented toward occupations and careers potentially far-removed from local communities.

Pedagogical orientations of modern schooling, according to Boli and Ramirez, involve curricular and organizational teachings that undercut the importance of place and kinship bonds, which are still of significance in many rural American communities. In their place, children are taught to believe that individual success in contemporary America primarily occurs as a function of state economic development policy and national/ international trade success. Further, as the key to economic participation is ideologically linked to educational attainment, citizens are encouraged to accept the centrality of school certificates and credentials in their lives—one of the assumptions upon which this work is also partly based. School documents and credentials thus legitimate the individual's entrance into the national workplace, a workplace at least partly controlled by the state.

Creating a "One Best System" in the U.S.

The public school revolution that occurred in this nation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was primarily an urban and industrial inspired revolution, although at the time it was announced as a unilateral victory for the forces of moral uplift and social progress (e.g., Tyack, 1974). Exploding city growth during this period was fueled by rural in-migration and foreign immigration. Such demographic changes were also accompanied by labor unrest and middle class perceptions that newly arriving city dwellers were driving down their previous "quality of life." As a consequence, school building and school reform movements quickly gathered momentum.

In searching for institutional models upon which to organize city schools, city leaders and professional educators quickly judged rural educational models as

too archaic and unprofessional for their purposes. Schooling was increasingly championed by reformers as an activity best guided by specialized knowledge as supervised by administrators well-versed in both the understanding of the science of child development and of scientific (i.e., efficient) management. Professionalizing public education state-wide meant that teachers and principals required better certification, and that enhanced accountability measures were required. In the main, late 19th and early 20th century school reformers had little but pity and/or contempt for rural schools and rural communities (Cubberley, 1914).

The urban "critique" of rural school governance and finance was probably correct by contemporary standards. Many of their organizational characteristics were viewed as archaic by metropolitan-based school reformers. Untrained school board members and trustees made many school decisions; attendance rates were generally lower than in the city; dropout rates were high; building maintenance was usually performed on a volunteer basis by parents; rural teachers frequently were less well prepared than city teachers; classes were typically mixed-grade; supervision of one- and two-room schools was administratively almost impossible, and so on (Tyack, 1974).

Reformers interested in "improving" rural schools generally believed improvement could happen in only one of two ways: either rural schools would disappear, as continued out-migration removed children from rural places, or rural schools could be made to look and operate more like urban ones. An alternative interpretation is that various rural school characteristics represented cultural values quite different from the ones that helped found the common school

movement. And then as now, many religious, locally-based, and non-industrial rural cultures were frequently at odds with the emerging conventional wisdom of schooling (DeYoung and Theobald, 1991).

Rural Views of Schooling

With important exceptions, many rural parents challenged the alleged superiority of mental over manual labor inherent in late 19th century calls for secondary education, which appeared to many as preparatory for college enrollments in towns and cities and not an education which would return native sons and daughters to the land (Perkinson, 1991). In the current era, high school completion appears relatively low where graduation appears to bear little local utility due to large-scale unemployment and/or where low-skilled extractive and/or service industries provide the major source of employment (e.g., DeYoung, 1985).

Other bases of rural school support also came under attack by metropolitan school reformers later in the 20th century. For example, Christian moral instruction was an important curricular orientation of most American schools before the Progressive era: yet, the secular and professional interests of many school reformers directly challenged these moral underpinnings and led to significant resistance in much of rural America. In rural America school/church ties were historically quite important. Even today in rural states like Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, and West Virginia, there are on-going challenges to proscriptions against displaying the ten commandments, challenges to the teaching of evolution, and/or battles over "offensive" textbooks (Page and Clelland, 1978).

Rural School Consolidation

Historically, rural communities placed high value on traditional family (and extended-family) relationships, sense of community, and the importance of "place." Rural school reform throughout the 20th century, however, devalued and undercut such traditional interests via school consolidation efforts dedicated to professionalism, curricular diversity, and efficiency. As late as 1930, there were 128,000 school districts and over 238,000 schools in America. By 1980, however, the number of school districts had dropped to 16,000 and schools to 61,000 (Stephens and Perry, 1991).

Even today, at a time when many urban school systems have begun to decentralize schools for various pedagogic reasons, some primarily rural states continue massive rural school closure policies under economies of scale arguments (e.g., Sher, 1983). The students and communities most inconvenienced—in terms of bus-ride times for students and inaccessibility to parents—are those most isolated and impoverished.

An Illustrative Case Study [1]

The problems of rural students at-risk of school failure and/or incompletion in the U.S. are in many ways similar to problems of low-income children and young people in metropolitan America. Yet, many chronically depressed and isolated rural communities still involved in extractive economies or ones dependent upon single labor-intensive and unskilled industries often contain schools without the funds to remediate many schooling deficiencies associated with rural poverty; frequently include family and community values inconsistent

with modern career orientations and instrumental schooling; and often contain parents who believe that college is financially unavailable.

The West Virginia county school system in which I am currently completing research (unfortunately) provides a good illustration of many of the topics discussed so far, as well as a number of school-based strategies for addressing the needs of rural at-risk children.

This system actually contains two administratively distinct populations: a K-4 elementary school and a small 5-8 middle school. Total enrollment of all grades plus kindergarten and pre-kindergarten is approximately 295. The school in question was constructed between the years of 1916 and 1925, and designed as a "town" school for grades 1-12. Over the years, however, the town's once prosperous economy has collapsed and the school—now administratively two schools—is considered rural. It's attendance area has also changed so that "the rural kids" in the countryside, who used to sometimes continue their schooling in town after elementary grades, are now all bused into the former town school daily. All of the former one- and two-room schools which flourished earlier in this century in outlying areas of the county have been closed during the past three decades.

Burnsville, the town in question, was a bustling American community up until the 1930s. Today, there is virtually no local economy, and most families remaining in and around the town are economically disadvantaged in multiple ways. The majority of county households either depend upon some form of government income assistance and/or have absent household heads working in far-removed construction or timbering industries. Frequently, children of

Burnsville School(s) dwell in trailers or small-frame housing located strategically along rural roads, and often they live in multiple generational units. Life in and around Burnsville today would undoubtedly disappoint city dwellers looking to escape to rural America.

Braxton County: A Brief History

Burnsville is located in Braxton County, West Virginia, the central-most of West Virginia's 55 counties. It's history is critically tied to America's industrial revolution, but its ties to this revolution, many claim, have been to its detriment (e.g., Eller, 1982). The county has historically depended upon the extractive industries of timbering, coal mining, and gas and oil drilling during the past hundred years. Unfortunately, most of these industries have usually been owned by outside corporations who pay few taxes on the wealth they control underground; and with a nation-wide recession in manufacturing, even the extractive jobs remaining in Braxton County typically require little formal schooling.

Agricultural opportunities in central West Virginia have been quite limited in size and scope this century. Most of the small-scale farming in the "hollows" of thousands of rivers and streams in West Virginia led to a more marginal/subsistence lifestyle than was available in better located agricultural settings to the east and to the west in the U.S. The isolation of communities in central West Virginia led to primarily local economic, social, and kinship systems whose social organization of production and reproduction differed from other regions of the U.S.

Yet Braxton County was geographically and economically fortunate in the 19th and early 20th centuries compared to other Appalachian regions. Two navigable rivers linked the county with the outside world and enabled a number of successful commercial activities to develop there. Transportation possibilities made possible by the Elk and Little Kanawha rivers also enabled the construction of several small towns in Braxton County, including Burnsville, Sutton, and Gassaway. Each of these towns had newspapers, banks, hotels, department stores, various mainline church denominations, and public schools. In other words, all the accoutrements associated with a strong and growing middle class.

The schools, in particular, showed signs of "progress" during the period, as the old subscription schools and later one-room schools increasingly became eclipsed in the larger population centers with larger and graded schools—much as was the earlier pattern in northeastern states (Cremin, 1961). Reading central West Virginia teacher oral histories of the early 20th century makes schooling there sound very similar to schooling to be found in most American communities prior to the great depression.

By the 1920s, Braxton County contained approximately 140 rural schools and four high schools. Some children graduated from outlying one- and two-room schools and came into the high schools. Most probably did not. Up until the past several decades, employment in extractive industries didn't usually require a high school education. And when there was work in the mines, in gas exploration and in timbering—typically the major sources of work in Braxton County—there was invariably little incentive to develop the sorts of advanced professional skills that

might have led to a job in some distant place whose industries fed off of Braxton County's extractive economy.

Braxton County: A Casualty of American Progress?

Burnsville's economy was at first based on extractive industries and local manufacturing, and both sorts of activities were made commercially possible by the Little Kanawha River. This river passes through oil and gas country and into the Ohio at Parkersburg. Timber extraction, oil and gas drilling, several veneer factories, a (wooden) wheel factory supplying Ford motors, and a wagon factory put Burnsville "on the map" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Skilled workers also became needed and trained for the local economy during this period, as the town of Gassaway was home to a large railroad maintenance yard, and a large chemical plant was built in the town of Sutton. By the first decade of the 20th century, then, Burnsville as well as two other county towns were thriving and growing places, and public schooling opportunities grew too.

Yet, as the boom periods of coal, timber, oil, and gas subsided, and as the railroads and local manufacturing firms were undercut by the "hard roads" that went around central West Virginia more than through them, regional economic decline also became personal and institutional disasters. By the 1950s, Braxton County had joined the ranks of most economically depressed regions of the country, where unemployment was high, wages low, and where dramatic out-migration of many of its citizens had been occurring for at least two decades.

Decline occurred in almost every positive economic area. In 1930, agricultural workers in the county comprised over 60% of the workforce. By 1980 it was less than three percent. While "hard-surface" roads were built in the county,

interstate commerce made possible by major highways mostly by-passed it, at the same time undercutting rail transportation. With the demise of the railroad, hundreds of employees throughout the county lost their jobs, visitors no longer traveled by rail into and through the county, and markets for the few agricultural and manufactured goods still being produced in the region became even harder to export.

Economic Decline and School Consolidation

Educational decline began to set in around the time of the larger national depression of the 1930s. During this period, many large tracts of land held by outside interests were forfeited to the state for non-payment of taxes—taxes that supported public education. Without jobs and incomes, many remaining residents faced loss of property if previous tax rates were continued, and a statewide constitutional amendment was passed in 1932 that placed a cap on property assessments. This had a further predictable impact on revenues available for local school funding. Due to lack of funds, many teachers remained unpaid and school terms were either shortened or the schools themselves closed altogether. In 1933, the state's 398 school districts were consolidated into 55 districts to coincide with county units. In so doing, the state of West Virginia took on significant responsibility for financing of schools in 55 county districts, making more than minimal local funding initiatives dependent on special elections held for such purposes.

While many metropolitan counties in West Virginia have been able to raise extra taxes for schooling (i.e., excess levies), the poorer rural counties, like Braxton, have not. Since growing transportation costs and teacher salaries require

the bulk of county funding in places like Braxton county, building maintenance and construction have typically suffered. Coupled with out-migration, the net effect was dramatic school consolidation.

Educational Instability and Students At-Risk

Burnsville schools and their children have inherited a great number of legacies from the boom-and-bust county history. When the county's high schools were consolidated for financial reasons in 1969, Burnsville's former 9-12 graders were all bused to the new (but unfinished) county high school. Shortly thereafter, Burnsville's remaining movie theater, bowling alley, and several restaurants, which depended upon the high school crowd for business, all went out of operation.

All of these developments were made possible by the completion of I-79, which runs virtually overhead of Burnsville Schools today. The interstate has in some ways dealt a deathblow to Burnsville: half of the town was torn down to build it, and people who are still left and own a car now use the interstate to drive either north or south to shop. The county high school was also made possible by the interstate, for it sits at the Flatwoods exit some twelve miles south of Burnsville.

My current research continues at a feverish pace, for Burnsville's middle school is being consolidated now with the county's two other middle schools in order to (again) save money for the district. Like the former high school consolidation project, middle school consolidation is supposed to provide an attractive and new facility with a larger and more varied curriculum. Not surprisingly, many if not most Burnsville residents remain opposed to the school

consolidation. They fear further deterioration of their small town, and are dubious about the claimed quality of the proposed county middle school. They have good reason to be suspicious.

Instabilities associated with the proposed new facility continue to affect school climate throughout the county. On the one hand, construction appears behind schedule, and not even the contractor is certain if the new building will be completed on time. In addition, changing state policies on seniority versus staff quality in the hiring of teachers, bus drivers, and custodial staff for consolidating school districts have colored many personnel issues there for almost two years. It was hoped by the county administration that building and staffing a completely new school facility would allow for hirings independent of traditional seniority-based protocols. However, having chosen and partially trained staff for the new school based upon applicant qualifications, the state overruled such attempts in another county school system, and Braxton County decided to comply with seniority quidelines in their final staffing decisions.

Many teachers throughout the system thus had their 1992 career expectations significantly altered in the Spring of 1991, and a number who were previously chosen to teach at the new middle school were cut completely from county teaching roles based on seniority considerations. All eight of Burnsville Middle School's regular classroom teachers were at first chosen to teach at the county middle school based upon their teaching evaluations, but seniority protocols reduced this number to six, and the two "losers" were RIFfed (reduced in force) and have no job in the school system now for 1992-1993.

How the county statistics on economic decline, population out-migration, and school consolidation can actually be seen and experienced in Burnsville is a general concern of my current work. A central theme that has emerged involves the numbers and types of people who "are not around" anymore in Burnsville. These are probably the sorts of people who used to provide a major source of financial and emotional support for Burnsville school. In an age in which community support of learner outcomes has increasingly been championed as an important strategy for improving all schools, the absence of the most accomplished and white-collar graduates of Burnsville High may be significant.

For quite some time, Burnsville has been a place where the only time highly educated and professional people—other than schoolteachers—could be seen on the street is during the spring and summer when large families have their reunions. One of the biggest annual gatherings in Burnsville is the Kanawha Alumni Association, which meets on Memorial Day weekend every May. This association of approximately 500 members are all graduates of Burnsville High (or graduates of the county high school who would have graduated from Burnsville), and is the largest high school alumni association in the state—even though Burnsville hasn't been a high school for over twenty years. Unfortunately, there is almost no interaction anymore between Kanawha Alumni and current students at Burnsville schools. Most alumni live hundreds of miles away, and, as the current president phrased it recently, "there really hasn't been much enthusiasm for the school (programs) once the high school was taken away."

While most children (above the age of 10) and adults who used to be found in Burnsville won't "be around" next year, the school building will remain.

The Braxton County Board of Education would like to build a new elementary school facility on Kanawha street, but they haven't got enough money. So, 150 or so young children will remain in portions of the old facility for at least a few more years. This appears as somewhat ironic to local residents, because one reason they were told that older children were being removed was because of the asbestos hazards of the old building that were too expensive to remove.

At-Risk Students in Braxton County (and Burnsville) Schools

Assuming poverty as a primary indicator, more than half of all Braxton County's students are officially at-risk. The county's economy has been depressed for over a decade, and the official unemployment rate in mid-1992 is approximately 20%. Of course, the unofficial rate is probably much higher. Current economic development patterns there are of four different types, but each is unlikely to transform the economic future of the county. Coal operations are scheduled to begin again in several years in the southern end of the county, but the jobs they may provide will just about off-set those lost last year at another site. Several years ago the operator of the county landfill applied for a permit to enable his facility to begin bringing in large quantities of out-of-state garbage. At the current time, this "economic development" scheme remains on hold.

A rapidly growing service industry based upon interstate travel has emerged in the past five years. The Flatwoods exit on I-79 now has a host of fast food, truck stop, and motel franchises. All of these places provide many minimum-wage jobs for local citizens, but few require advanced education or inspire career orientations at the county high school located just a stone's throw from most of these businesses.

Another development near the high school and the fast-food restaurants is the soon to be completed regional jail. The regional jail is eagerly awaited by many, since dozens of county residents will get a chance to work there as cooks, janitors, and guards. The county already has lots of people who may be able to cook and clean at the prison: these are the sorts of jobs also fought for at the county schools. And since the county's largest employer (i.e., the school system) is laying-off workers due to consolidation and state funding cutbacks, competition for these jobs is likely to be intense.

Meanwhile, more than 50% of the children enrolled in the system's nine elementary and middle schools (99% of whom are white) were below the poverty line in 1991. In one elementary school, 77% of the children received free/reduced lunches; in the least poverty-affected school, "only" 53% fell into this category. At the combined Burnsville schools, 63% of the students received free or reduced-price lunches and/or breakfasts. According to the principal, however, the actual figure would be much higher were all those eligible to apply. Many parents, he suggests, remain poor but proud.

To signify how the national economy affects Braxton County schools, enrollment levels in the county's pre-kindergarten programs have risen significantly during the past three years. Central office staff believe that many families now coming into Braxton County are back living with parents and siblings in the wake of job losses in metropolitan America. Many of these families are alledgedly waiting for (typically minimum wage) jobs to be restored. Meanwhile, the number of pre-kindergarten poor children qualifying in 1992 for Head Start money has increased by almost 20% (to 74%) since 1990.

Statistical information on Burnsville students and their families suggests the socioeconomic status of those who attend and teach at the school. Sixteen percent of the student bodies are from "professional" households—many are the children of teachers. Twenty-eight percent are from blue-collar homes, but frequently children from these homes live in households where one parent is absent on a weekly basis, engaged in work in another county or state. Thirty percent of the schools' 297 students come from homes where parents work in unskilled trades or service industries; 18% from families with just enough income to not qualify for welfare; and 7% from families on AFDC.

Of the thirty-one students who started seventh grade in September, twenty-eight finished the school year. Of these, fourteen students lived in households with both parents working; four had at least one working parent absent on a weekly basis; two lived in multi-generational homes, and twelve lived in homes either without both natural parents or in single-parent families. Mr. McCoy classified eight of these twenty-eight students as at-risk either because of their attitudes toward school, the attitudes of their parents toward school, or due to the attitudes of parents toward their children. Unlike many principals in metropolitan areas, Mr. McCoy claimed his knowledge of each student's situation was based on twenty-two years of experience with each of the families of these children and from working with most of them for seven or eight years.

District Philosophy for At-Risk Students

Almost all county instructional programs are based upon what the district superintendent argues is an at-risk educational philosophy. In his judgement, Braxton County schools can only be successful if they provide local children with

the types of programs and instruction that will make them successful in life and that will win the larger support of the entire community. He suggests this has not always been the case in Braxton County.

District philosophy is built around the notion that basic literacy and numeracy are a must. Therefore, academic instruction, constant monitoring of pupil performance, strong building leadership, high expectations, and a positive learning climate are emphasized at all schools. In effect then, guidelines of the Effective Schools movement underlie many of the day-to-day operations of Braxton County schools, and almost half of the county's principals and a significant percentage of the district's teachers have been sponsored to attend state-level workshops on Effective School organizational strategies. Apparently the system-wide emphasis on academic skills has paid off in Braxton County, for it's schools have been among the state's highest grade-level scorers (at the earlier grades) since the mid-1980s.

In addition, district education policy subsidizes a number of out-of-school educational endeavors as support services to the school system. The superintendent and school board believe that building public trust in the schools and providing positive learning experiences for children require recreational and literary support systems in the larger community as well as the schools. Thus, even in the face of district budget shortfalls, the school system has helped fund the three town libraries and helped to raise funds for the county recreational park, located not far from the high school. The system also is quite aggressive with regard to its GED and active parenting programs, aggressively seeking-out state

and federal grants for supplemental programs consistent with district educational philosophy.

At-Risk Programs in Burnsville Schools

Burnsville schools have historically had significant community support, although instructional programs currently involving parents are relatively low. Many poorer families live out of town and aren't able to drive to the school easily. Other families have two wage earners, which makes volunteering to help difficult. There are adult education and active parenting programs available in Burnsville, but these are both small and run out of the Board office and the library rather than the schools themselves. And, unlike metropolitan schools that may be able to bolster community support via school-business partnerships, such partnerships are less feasible in Burnsville, for it has very few businesses to speak of anymore.

Nevertheless, there remains a belief in town that Burnsville schools provide a sound education, moral instruction, and that the teachers there usually do a good job. Most teachers and non-certified workers have been in the school for a number of years. Many who work in the school graduated from it when it was a high school. Thus almost all school people are well known locally, and they appear very trusted by the public at large.

Mr. McCoy, the principal for both schools, has also been at Burnsville for twenty-two years and is involved with many if not most civic groups in town. He is an elder in the Methodist Church; he teaches hunter-safety to most of the middle school children; he is a county scout leader; he is treasurer of his bowling league; and is a member of the Masonic Lodge. He also symbolizes a bridge to a more cosmopolitan world, for his father used to be an engineer when trains ran

routinely through the region, and his teaching area is science. (The county superintendent similarly bridges the worlds of rural West Virginia and industrial America in ways too complex to discuss here.)

Even in the face of constant budget shortfalls and school closings, an air of staff stability exists at Burnsville Schools. Budget cutbacks have cost the schools teachers and staff over the years, but almost never do teachers in Braxton County resign and move away. Both schools retain an emphasis on instruction and academics, and several teachers have won state-wide awards for innovation in instruction. Community support, both historically and currently, is high, and like other rural schools, support of athletic events (which draw the most parents to school now) is a major place to see how the community identifies with Burnsville Middle School. Faculty morale remained high at both schools in 1991 and 1992, and a testimonial to the warmness and respect for the school and its programs is reflected in the fact that almost every teacher who has children brings them to school with them so that they can go to school there.

Paradoxically perhaps, Mr. McCoy reports few formal programs for at-risk children in his school. While arguing that most Burnsville children are developmentally or socially at-risk, he suggests that the caring environment directed toward school success that is focused on enhancing positive self-concepts among all children continues to be the emphasis. Such school-wide programs as Assertive Discipline and School-Based Assistance Teams have been proposed and instituted in Burnsville schools, but special pull-out programs where children are identified as needing extra help are not part of the schools' philosophy. There is a part-time gifted education teacher, a part-time speech and hearing teacher, and a

full time special education teacher; however, because these individuals typically have multiple certifications, have worked "both sides of the street" with exceptional learners, and frequently share instructional spaces and materials, younger children would probably find it difficult to comprehend how they had been grouped for particular attention in these schools were they interested.

One of the specific efforts undertaken at most Braxton County schools appears to be routine school-wide award ceremonies that publicize student success. Good grades, positive citizenship, and other special achievements are widely proclaimed throughout the school during the year, and most of these ceremonies are covered in both county newspapers, even though many parents cannot or do not attend such events.

Concerns at Braxton County High School

While reorganizing elementary and middle school programs toward a general "at-risk" philosophy appears to have been successful, the major battle in Braxton County during the past decade has been at the high school level (i.e., BCHS). Here, arguments over vocationalism versus academics and school-wide emphasis on meeting student needs versus subject matter specialization have been pronounced. Of late, a school-wide climate of caring and open communication appears to have been achieved, but as recently as two years ago, the same school system that now produces among the highest elementary reading scores statewide was also one with among the state's highest 1990 longitudinal dropout rates: approximately 30%.

Since Braxton County is a place where few jobs requiring a high school degree are locally available, where poverty and dysfunctional families are

prevalent, and where higher education opportunities have historically been absent, "explaining" the dropout rate as a function of extra-school factors has a long history there. Under the rationale of improving school climate to improve the liklihood of school success among the at-risk student population, however, the high school was in effect told to take "ownership" of the dropout problem rather than to attribute dropout rates to contextual factors or to "problem" students (DeYoung, 1991).

In 1987, monies from the Job Training Partnership Act and Appalachian Regional Commission were used for an innovative dropout prevention program based loosely upon cooperative learning strategies. According to the program, dropping out of school is but the final event in a student's career, an event that can be negated if/when teachers and other school based staff undertake the task of analyzing and remediating the causes for student decisions to leave school. Accordingly, "student advocacy teams" composed of teachers, staff, and students were formed to intercede in the school careers of identified at-risk students. Great pressure was put on the school to utilize such tactics over and above the wishes of the building principal who was alleged to be less interested in such undertakings.

By 1992, the longitudinal dropout rate had declined to approximately 8%, and the four-year college-going rate for 1991 graduates soared to almost 50%, up from only 25% only several years earlier. Three school-improvement thrusts were reported to have been responsible for the turn-around. The primary thrust involved a change in school climate, whereby the new principal announced his intention to have all students succeed in BCHS, not just those academically inclined. At the same time, he instituted a number of rewards for perfect

attendance, including early school dismissal for some students and free entry into a number of school functions. According to the school guidance counselor, his philosophy (much changed from that of his predecessor) is that the role of high school "is not to punish students, but to help them." He is credited by her with treating all BCHS students with "dignity."

It seems highly unlikely that one person, i.e., the new principal, could transform BCHS as dramatically as the statistics indicate in just two years. More plausibly, his appointment to the school also served as a catalyst for school improvement already present but underdeveloped there in the years just prior to his hiring. So too, while developing and maintaining a "climate of success" appears to have become a major preoccupation of school staff, specific skills and programs for at-risk students were also developed.

In addition to remedial and tutorial help, programs to heighten the expectations of students for post-high school opportunities have been installed in BCHS during the past two years. For example, a student "shadowing program" was put into place, whereby students go into the arguably few local businesses and workplaces to observe the world of work. Most recently, BCHS obtained external funding to underwrite their Aim High program, which enables all interested students to visit various higher education institutions in the state and to help them understand the requirements and protocols necessary to attend them.

Tensions between vocational and academic programs and interests abound in rural high schools like BCHS. In order to expand the curriculum to accomodate both academic and vocational interests, the school system has pushed some of the college-prep courses down into the 8th-grade, while striving to continue most of

the vocational programs (like keyboarding) of potential relevance to both academic and vocational students.

In effect, then, Braxton County schools are hoping to better prepare young adolescents for eventual college enrollments with their new middle school reorganization. At the same time, softening the impersonality at BCHS continues and, in addition to a more student-centered school climate and high expectations and support services for at-risk high school students, BCHS also is working with outside community agencies and programs targeted at adolescents. In a number of ways, then, BCHS seems to have altered a more traditional model of high school as a site for academic instruction to one of advocacy, referral, and instruction.

Conclusion

The educational "stories" I am interested in telling about Braxton County, West Virginia, and its schools reflect but one set of iterations of rural life and rural education in the U.S. There are virtually no majority—minority conflicts in this county, and there are no open political feuds that frequently affect community life and schooling dynamics in many rural places. People here trust the schools and revere the good teachers who have labored for so long for comparatively little reward. Nevertheless, there are significant educational issues and problems here that approximate many of those talked of early in this essay and that are specifically related to the futures of students at risk.

Braxton County schools, as most schools in economically depressed and isolated places, face a number of problems in dealing with their at-risk student populations. Because local tax dollars still are a primary funding mechanism for local schools, places with few resources have difficulty in funding special

programs for at-risk students. Thus, inherited economic disadvantage in rural places usually has consequences for the present and for the future. Redefining the economic base upon which depressed rural schools can build their programs has to be near the top of the list of any systematic effort to improve the life chances of at-risk rural students.

Redefining the purpose of schools must also be a primary concern of schools with significant numbers of children at-risk of school incompletion. In places where desired role models are absent and the local structure of opportunities is limited, schools must attempt to demonstrate and inculcate the incentives necessary for students to complete school. Such incentives may more often be taken for granted in suburban schools, but they cannot be in places like Braxton County. School people there recognize they are enmeshed in an economic, historic, and cultural battle, not just an instructional one.

Braxton County schools probably do more with what they have then many school systems do. They provide sound academic instruction, comprehensive services, and an attitude of caring. They intervene forcibly in the cultural politics of the United States, for they instill values and teach skills required for a national culture and an international economy in a region arguably socially and economically scarred by national success in such areas.

Effective rural schools typically "export" their best "products," leaving behind families and communities that often are or ought to be anxious or ambivalent about school success and school completion. In places like Braxton County, schools are arguably a more central institution to the individual success of at-risk students than they are in metropolitan America; yet, they have an even

more difficult time in providing the sorts of education and cultural services necessary to facilitate student persistence and school completion. National efforts to improve the life chances of rural at-risk children ought to better recognize and better support rural schools like those of Braxton County, West Virginia. They are not the cause of economic decline in rural places. Rather, they are the institutions that have to live and work with the consequences of such decline.

Endnotes

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